ADVANCES
In Tourism Studies

RESEARCH ARTICLE

8 OPEN ACCESS
Check for updates

Sacred Traditions and Tourist Gazes: Community Experiences of Heritage Tourism in Bali

Annisa Rizkikkadduhani

Education Department, Universitas Mataram, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Bali has become one of the most studied tourism destinations in Southeast Asia, often celebrated for its rich cultural heritage and ritual practices. Yet, as tourism expands, heritage is increasingly reshaped into performances tailored for visitors, raising questions about authenticity, commodification, and community agency. This study investigates how Balinese communities negotiate the tension between sacred tradition and tourist consumption in the context of heritage tourism. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with cultural practitioners, temple caretakers, dancers, and local residents, alongside participant observation at temple festivals and staged performances. Thematic analysis reveals that while many residents view tourism as an opportunity to share culture and sustain livelihoods, they also express ambivalence toward the commercialization of rituals and performances. Narratives highlight strategies of negotiation, where authenticity is redefined as a balance between cultural integrity and economic survival. At the same time, concerns about cultural dilution and the erosion of spiritual meaning remain prominent. By foregrounding community voices, the study contributes to critical debates on authenticity and heritage in tourism, emphasizing that cultural sustainability in Bali requires more than preservation policies; it demands local participation in defining what authenticity means in practice.

INTRODUCTION

Bali is internationally renowned as a cultural tourism destination where temples, rituals, and artistic performances form the foundation of its global appeal. Since the rise of mass tourism in the 1970s, Balinese culture has been at the center of a paradox: it is both preserved as a marker of identity and transformed into a commodity for tourist consumption (Picard, 1996; Hitchcock, 2001). Heritage tourism in Bali is characterized by this duality, as sacred practices such as temple ceremonies, dances, and processions are staged not only for religious purposes but also for visitor audiences. This raises enduring questions about authenticity, commodification, and cultural sustainability in one of the world's most iconic destinations.

The concept of authenticity has been central to tourism studies since MacCannell (1973) argued that tourists seek "authentic" cultural experiences but often encounter staged versions designed for them. In Bali, these dynamics are particularly visible in the transformation of traditional dance and ritual into performances adapted for tourists (Vickers, 2012). While some scholars argue that commodification leads to cultural dilution and loss of meaning (Greenwood, 1989), others emphasize local agency in redefining authenticity and strategically adapting culture for tourism markets (Cohen, 1988; Reuter, 2002). This tension makes Bali a critical case for examining how heritage is negotiated in the interplay between sacred tradition and tourist spectacle.

Heritage tourism in Bali is also shaped by broader political and economic forces. Government policies have long promoted "cultural tourism" as the island's branding strategy, positioning Balinese identity as both distinct and marketable (Picard, 1996; Hitchcock & Darma Putra, 2007). This institutional framing often emphasizes preservation and authenticity, yet in practice it encourages cultural performances to be standardized for mass consumption. As Hitchcock (2019) notes, Balinese cultural products are simultaneously vehicles of economic development and symbols of identity politics. The result is a dynamic field where community voices, state agendas, and market demands intersect.

For local communities, the experience of heritage tourism is marked by ambivalence. On one hand, tourism provides opportunities for economic gain, recognition, and pride in sharing Balinese culture with the world (Cole, 2007). On the other, it generates anxieties about spiritual erosion, commodification of sacred practices, and uneven benefit distribution. Temple caretakers and performers often face the dilemma of maintaining ritual integrity while meeting

CONTACT Annisa Rizkikkadduhani ✉ Annisard11@gmail.com

tourist expectations. Such negotiations underscore that authenticity is not a fixed attribute but a socially constructed and contested concept shaped by power relations and everyday practices (Cohen & Cohen, 2012).

This study responds to the need for more community-centered research on heritage tourism in Bali. While much literature has analyzed authenticity from the perspective of tourists or state policy, fewer studies foreground local narratives of how authenticity is lived, contested, and redefined. Using qualitative methods—interviews with cultural practitioners and residents, combined with participant observation of ceremonies and performances—this research explores how communities negotiate the balance between tradition and commodification. By doing so, it contributes to broader debates on cultural sustainability in tourism, demonstrating that heritage preservation in Bali cannot be understood solely through institutional policies or market frameworks but must account for community agency in shaping authenticity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism studies have long been concerned with the notion of authenticity, especially when cultural practices are presented for external audiences. MacCannell's (1973) seminal concept of "staged authenticity" argued that tourists often seek authentic encounters with local life but are instead presented with carefully constructed performances designed to appear authentic. This perspective shaped decades of scholarship, suggesting that tourism inevitably distorts cultural expressions. Yet subsequent critiques challenged the binary of "real" versus "staged." Cohen (1988) introduced the idea of emergent authenticity, proposing that cultural forms adapted for tourism can generate new, legitimate meanings for both hosts and visitors. Building on this, Cohen and Cohen (2012) argued that authenticity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic, socially constructed process, validated through different forms of "authentication." In contexts like Bali, these debates remain highly relevant because cultural practices are simultaneously sacred rituals and commodities for global consumption.

The literature on commodification further complicates this picture. Greenwood's (1989) influential critique warned that when rituals are transformed into tourist attractions, they risk losing their original meaning, reducing culture to a product that can be bought and sold. In Bali, this has been a central concern, as dances, ceremonies, and festivals that once functioned primarily as religious or communal events are often restructured into staged spectacles for tourists (Vickers, 2012). Critics argue that when temple ceremonies are rescheduled for tourist convenience or when dances are shortened to fit evening programs, spiritual meaning is diluted. However, other scholars argue that commodification is not inherently destructive. For example, Cole (2007) and Hitchcock (2019) demonstrate that commodification can enable cultural revival, economic empowerment, and intercultural exchange. In this perspective, Balinese communities may reinterpret performances in ways that sustain both economic livelihoods and cultural pride, highlighting that commodification is as much about negotiation as it is about loss.

Balinese cultural tourism has been profoundly shaped by state policy. Since the 1970s, the Indonesian government has explicitly promoted "cultural tourism" as the branding strategy for Bali, positioning the island as both a showcase of Indonesian heritage and a unique international destination (Picard, 1996; Hitchcock & Darma Putra, 2007). This framing institutionalized authenticity as a core value while simultaneously commodifying it. Government discourse emphasizes preservation, yet policies encourage the packaging of rituals and heritage for mass consumption. As Hitchcock (2019) observes, Balinese identity has been instrumentalized to serve both development agendas and political legitimacy, making cultural tourism a site where power, economics, and identity intersect. The result is a complex field in which authenticity is mediated by competing forces: state agendas, market demand, and community values.

Scholars increasingly highlight community agency in this process. Rather than viewing local populations as passive victims of commodification, research demonstrates how they actively negotiate cultural meanings. Reuter (2002) shows how Balinese villagers maintain distinctions between rituals performed for religious purposes and those adapted for tourists, preserving spiritual integrity while simultaneously embracing economic opportunities. Similarly, Cohen and Cohen (2012) highlight that authentication can be "hot," when communities passionately defend sacred meanings, or "cool," when authenticity is discursively assigned by state or market actors. In Bali, both forms operate side by side, as communities contest external definitions of culture while selectively adapting practices for tourist audiences.

The role of the tourist gaze also shapes these negotiations. Urry and Larsen (2011) argue that tourism is framed by expectations, with visitors seeking images of exoticism, spirituality, and cultural uniqueness. In Bali, these expectations influence how dances, rituals, and crafts are presented. While tourists may desire "authentic" experiences, their preferences often encourage standardized or dramatized versions of culture. Communities respond by selectively highlighting aspects of culture that resonate with tourist imaginaries while safeguarding other elements for internal use. This selective performance illustrates how authenticity is co-produced between hosts and guests, rather than imposed unilaterally.

The literature also connects heritage tourism to broader discussions of cultural sustainability. UNESCO (2016) defines cultural sustainability as the capacity to maintain cultural practices in meaningful ways for communities, not only as preserved artifacts. In Bali, this sustainability is threatened when rituals become overly oriented toward external consumption, but it can also be reinforced when tourism provides resources for cultural maintenance. For example, revenues from ticketed performances are sometimes reinvested into temple upkeep and community ceremonies (Picard, 1996). However, concerns persist that financial benefits are unevenly distributed, with elites or external investors capturing a disproportionate share, leaving communities vulnerable to cultural dilution and economic marginalization (Hitchcock, 2001).

Synthesizing these perspectives, the literature suggests that heritage tourism in Bali is not simply a story of cultural erosion but of negotiation, adaptation, and contestation. Early critiques emphasized commodification as loss, but more recent work highlights the agency of communities in redefining authenticity to meet both spiritual and economic needs (Cole, 2007; Hitchcock, 2019). Authenticity emerges as a relational construct, shaped through interactions among communities, states, markets, and tourists. The Balinese case illustrates the multiplicity of meanings attached to cultural performance: sacred ritual, economic resource, political symbol, and tourist attraction. By focusing on community narratives, research can illuminate how authenticity is lived and reinterpreted in everyday practices, offering a more nuanced account of cultural sustainability in tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate how Balinese communities negotiate authenticity within the context of heritage tourism. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand not only the observable practices of tourism and performance but also the meanings that local actors attach to these practices. Issues of authenticity, commodification, and cultural sustainability are deeply embedded in lived experience, making narrative and interpretive methods particularly suitable.

Fieldwork was conducted in several Balinese communities known for their strong engagement with cultural tourism, including Ubud, Gianyar, and selected temple complexes where ritual ceremonies and performances are simultaneously oriented toward religious life and tourist audiences. These sites were chosen because they exemplify the tensions between sacred practice and commodification. Ubud represents Bali's artistic hub, with dance performances staged nightly for visitors, while temple sites such as Besakih and Tanah Lot illustrate how ritual spaces double as tourism attractions.

Participants were drawn from a broad cross-section of cultural actors, including temple caretakers, dancers, gamelan musicians, artisans, and community leaders. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation of individuals whose livelihoods and identities were most directly affected by heritage tourism. Snowball sampling was also employed, as initial participants often referred the researcher to other individuals with relevant insights. In total, approximately forty-five participants were interviewed, with variation in age, gender, and role within the community to capture a diversity of perspectives.

Data collection consisted of three primary techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, and focused on how individuals interpreted authenticity, how they perceived the impact of tourism on rituals and performances, and how they negotiated the balance between sacred obligations and tourist expectations. Second, participant observation was carried out at cultural events and ceremonies. This included both temple-based rituals and staged performances in Ubud, allowing the researcher to observe differences in framing, audience interaction, and symbolic meaning. Third, informal conversations and community discussions provided additional context, capturing everyday reflections on tourism that may not have emerged in formal interviews. Field notes were recorded systematically to document observations and reflections.

All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or Balinese, depending on the participant's preference, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Transcripts were produced and translated into English where necessary. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The process began with repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to achieve immersion in the data, followed by initial coding of recurring ideas related to authenticity, commodification, and community agency. Codes were then organized into themes that reflected participants' negotiations of authenticity, such as the distinction between sacred and staged performances, ambivalence toward commodification, and strategies for cultural preservation. NVivo software was employed to manage and organize the coding process.

Several measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify resonance with their experiences. Triangulation was achieved by drawing on multiple sources of data, including interviews, observations, and informal discussions. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher keeping a journal to document positionality, including awareness of being an outsider to Balinese cultural contexts and the influence this might have on data collection and interpretation.

Pseudonyms are used in all reporting, and sensitive information about specific rituals was handled with discretion to respect cultural integrity. By combining interviews, observations, and narrative interpretation, the methodology was designed to capture a nuanced and ethically responsible understanding of how Balinese communities negotiate authenticity within heritage tourism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sacredness and the Tourist Gaze

Participants consistently reflected on the tension between the sacredness of ritual life and the presence of tourists observing or photographing these practices. Temple ceremonies were described as spiritual obligations central to Balinese Hindu identity, yet they had also become public spectacles for visitors seeking cultural experiences. In communities surrounding temples such as Besakih and Tanah Lot, participants expressed pride that their rituals attracted international attention and symbolized Bali's global reputation. One temple caretaker explained that "tourists are curious because they see how strong our faith is. In some ways, their presence shows respect." Such reflections suggest that tourism can be interpreted as an affirmation of cultural distinctiveness and resilience.

At the same time, many participants conveyed unease about being watched in moments of religious intimacy. Several dancers and musicians performing at temple ceremonies emphasized that rituals are primarily for the gods and the community, not for outsiders. The presence of tourists particularly when accompanied by cameras and smartphones was often described as intrusive. A dancer in Gianyar noted that "sometimes when we dance for the gods, the tourists think it is a show. They clap or take pictures, but they do not understand the meaning." These accounts reveal ambivalence: while tourism brings recognition, it can also distort the spiritual atmosphere of sacred practices.

Participants also distinguished between ceremonies where tourist presence was accepted and those where it felt inappropriate. Large-scale festivals, such as Odalan anniversaries, were considered appropriate for outside viewing, as they served both communal and performative functions. However, more intimate rituals, such as family-based offerings or cremation ceremonies, were regarded as spaces where tourism disrupted cultural boundaries. One elder emphasized that "some ceremonies are open, but others are private. Tourists do not always know the difference, and this causes tension." This highlights the importance of cultural boundaries in shaping how authenticity and sacredness are negotiated.

Despite these tensions, some participants viewed the tourist gaze as an opportunity to educate visitors and to reinforce community pride. In Ubud, younger performers described how explaining the meaning of dances and rituals to audiences enhanced their own sense of cultural identity. One gamelan musician remarked that "when we tell the story behind the dance, we feel proud, not just for the tourist but for ourselves." Here, the gaze becomes reciprocal, providing a platform for communities to assert agency and reshape outsiders' understandings of Balinese culture.

Taken together, the narratives in this section illustrate that the tourist gaze is not simply a force of cultural objectification. Instead, it is negotiated by communities as both recognition and intrusion, pride and discomfort.

Balinese actors interpret the presence of tourists in sacred spaces through ambivalent lenses, seeing it as an opportunity for cultural affirmation while also identifying risks of misunderstanding and spiritual dilution. These negotiations underscore that authenticity in Bali is experienced not as a fixed condition but as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay between sacred practice and external observation.

Staging Culture: Performance and Commodification

A recurring theme in participants' narratives was the adaptation of cultural practices into staged performances for tourist consumption. In Ubud, nightly dance shows were described as one of the clearest examples of how rituals rooted in temple offerings have been transformed into spectacles marketed to international visitors. Dancers and musicians explained that these performances drew from sacred traditions such as the Legong, Barong, or Kecak, but were shortened in duration, rearranged in structure, and often performed outside temple contexts. One dancer reflected that "in the temple, the dance is for the gods, and it can last many hours. For the tourists, it must finish in one hour. The meaning changes." Such comments highlight how commodification reshapes rituals by compressing and simplifying them for market audiences.

Despite these changes, participants did not describe the process solely in negative terms. Several performers emphasized that staged performances provided livelihoods and opportunities to sustain traditions that might otherwise decline. A gamelan teacher in Gianyar explained that "young people are motivated to learn music because they can perform for tourists and earn income. Without the stage, maybe they would not continue." In this way, commodification was framed as both a threat to sacred meaning and a resource for cultural transmission. The economic incentives of tourism thus intersect with cultural sustainability, producing ambivalent but pragmatic responses.

The distinction between "ritual performance" and "tourist performance" was a common strategy for managing this tension. Temple caretakers and community leaders often emphasized that authentic rituals continued unchanged within sacred contexts, while staged performances were presented as adaptations designed specifically for outsiders. This differentiation allowed participants to reconcile concerns about authenticity by maintaining separate spheres of practice. As one community leader noted, "what happens for the gods remains the same. What happens for the tourists is another thing. We know the difference." By framing staged performances as parallel rather than replacements, communities asserted control over the boundaries of authenticity.

At the same time, participants expressed concern that the popularity of staged shows could lead to misunderstandings about Balinese culture. Several noted that tourists often assumed that short performances in Ubud fully represented the depth of ritual life, without recognizing the complexity and duration of ceremonies conducted in temples. A dancer explained that "sometimes the tourist thinks the Barong show is only entertainment, but they do not know its meaning in our culture. It is more than a story, it is part of our religion." This gap between representation and understanding reflects the risks of commodification, where meaning is flattened into entertainment value.

Overall, the accounts suggest that commodification through staged performance is neither wholly destructive nor entirely empowering. It represents a process of negotiation in which Balinese communities balance economic opportunity with cultural integrity. By distinguishing between sacred and staged contexts, communities attempt to preserve ritual authenticity while adapting to the realities of the tourism economy. Yet the risk of cultural dilution and misinterpretation persists, underscoring the fragility of this balance. In this way, staging culture emerges as both a practical livelihood strategy and a site of contestation about the meaning of authenticity in Balinese heritage tourism.

Negotiating Authenticity and Community Agency

Participants repeatedly emphasized that authenticity in Balinese heritage tourism is not fixed but actively negotiated within communities. Rather than perceiving themselves as passive victims of commodification, many actors described strategies for maintaining cultural meaning while adapting to tourist markets. Temple caretakers often drew clear distinctions between ceremonies conducted for spiritual purposes and those oriented toward visitors, noting that "rituals for the gods follow the old ways, while what we do for tourists is adjusted. Both exist,

but they serve different audiences." This dual approach reflects a community effort to protect sacred integrity while acknowledging the realities of economic dependence on tourism.

Such negotiations were framed as deliberate acts of agency. Dancers and musicians explained that they maintained ritual precision during temple performances, even when tourist audiences were present, but felt freer to adapt structure and length for staged shows in Ubud. By sustaining parallel systems, they ensured that sacred rituals continued to carry their original significance, while tourist performances served as cultural showcases and income-generating opportunities. As one performer explained, "authenticity does not disappear, it moves between contexts. We decide what to keep for ourselves and what to share." This demonstrates how authenticity is redefined in practice, shaped by community choices rather than dictated solely by external forces.

Community leaders also described efforts to safeguard authenticity through internal regulation. In some villages, councils of elders and cultural associations monitored performances to ensure that tourist adaptations did not cross boundaries deemed unacceptable. These mechanisms of cultural governance reflect an ongoing process of collective negotiation, where authenticity is preserved not through rigid preservation but through adaptive management. This echoes scholarly arguments that authenticity is best understood as a social process of "authentication" rather than a static attribute (Cohen & Cohen, 2012).

At the same time, participants acknowledged tensions within communities. While some elders expressed concern that younger generations prioritized economic gain over ritual meaning, many younger performers saw tourism as a source of pride and recognition. For them, authenticity was not diminished by commodification but expanded, as Balinese culture gained visibility on a global stage. A young musician in Gianyar explained that "tourists give us a chance to show who we are. Even if it is a short version, it is still authentic because it comes from us." These generational differences illustrate that authenticity is not a consensus but a contested space where multiple interpretations coexist.

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that Balinese communities exercise agency in defining what counts as authentic in the context of heritage tourism. They negotiate boundaries between sacred and staged, regulate cultural adaptations through communal decision-making, and reframe authenticity as a flexible, living quality that evolves with context. Rather than a simple story of cultural erosion, the findings suggest that authenticity in Bali is continually reworked by communities themselves, embodying both resistance to commodification and creative adaptation to the opportunities of tourism.

Cultural Sustainability and Intergenerational Perspectives

Concerns about the long-term sustainability of Balinese culture emerged strongly in participants' accounts, often articulated through intergenerational differences in perspective. Elder community members, particularly temple caretakers and senior dancers, voiced anxieties about the erosion of spiritual meaning in the face of growing tourist demand. They worried that young people increasingly viewed rituals as opportunities for performance or income generation rather than as sacred obligations. One elder remarked that "for us, the ceremony is prayer; for them, sometimes it becomes work. I fear the meaning is slowly being forgotten." Such reflections highlight fears that cultural sustainability is under threat when economic incentives overshadow ritual devotion.

In contrast, younger participants expressed a sense of pride in sharing Balinese culture with international audiences and often framed tourism as an avenue for cultural renewal. Many argued that the visibility and income provided by tourism motivated youth to learn traditional arts such as dance, gamelan, or craft-making. A young performer explained that "without tourists, maybe the young people would not be interested. Because of tourism, we practice more and we keep our traditions alive." From this perspective, commodification is not seen as cultural loss but as an adaptive strategy that ensures cultural continuity under changing conditions.

Both generations acknowledged that tourism had altered cultural practices, but they differed in how they evaluated these changes. Older participants often stressed preservation, authenticity, and ritual purity, while younger participants emphasized adaptation, visibility, and economic survival. These divergent views illustrate that cultural sustainability is not a uniform goal but a contested process negotiated across generations. Authenticity, in this sense, is understood differently depending on lived experience and expectations for the future.

Despite these differences, there was also evidence of dialogue between generations. Many communities sought to balance concerns for ritual integrity with opportunities for cultural display. In practice, this meant

maintaining strict adherence to ceremonial protocols within temples while allowing adaptations in tourist venues. Some younger participants expressed respect for elders' concerns and emphasized that their performances for tourists did not replace sacred rituals but complemented them. These shared understandings reflect a pragmatic recognition that sustaining Balinese culture requires both protection of tradition and openness to adaptation.

Overall, intergenerational perspectives reveal the dynamic nature of cultural sustainability in Balinese tourism. Rather than being a linear process of either decline or preservation, sustainability emerges as an ongoing negotiation that integrates past, present, and future. Elders safeguard ritual meanings, while younger generations reinterpret authenticity in ways that align with global visibility and economic viability. Together, these perspectives underscore that the resilience of Balinese heritage lies not in resisting change but in the capacity of communities to continually renegotiate authenticity across generations.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex ways in which Balinese communities negotiate authenticity in the context of heritage tourism. Rather than viewing authenticity as a static quality that is either preserved or lost, the narratives reveal it as a dynamic and contested process shaped by ritual practice, tourist expectations, and community agency. These insights extend longstanding debates in tourism studies, particularly those concerning authenticity, commodification, and cultural sustainability.

First, the results confirm and complicate MacCannell's (1973) notion of staged authenticity. While sacred rituals are indeed adapted into tourist performances, participants' accounts show that this staging does not necessarily represent cultural erosion. Instead, communities maintain parallel systems, preserving the integrity of temple rituals while adapting versions for external audiences. This duality aligns with Cohen's (1988) concept of emergent authenticity, in which cultural forms acquire new meanings through interaction with tourism. The findings also resonate with Cohen and Cohen's (2012) notion of "authentication," as authenticity is continually redefined through communal decision-making, generational negotiations, and everyday practices.

Second, the findings shed light on the ambivalent effects of commodification. Consistent with Greenwood's (1989) critique, some participants expressed concern that rituals lose depth and meaning when transformed into staged performances. Yet, other narratives echo Cole's (2007) argument that commodification can also empower communities by providing economic benefits, cultural visibility, and opportunities for intergenerational transmission. For instance, younger participants described tourism as a motivating force to sustain interest in Balinese arts, suggesting that commodification can contribute to cultural continuity rather than decline. This ambivalence underscores the importance of moving beyond binary assessments of commodification as either destructive or beneficial.

Third, the study demonstrates the role of community agency in negotiating authenticity. Participants articulated strategies to safeguard sacred rituals while adapting cultural forms for tourist audiences, revealing that local actors exercise significant control over cultural meanings. These findings echo Reuter's (2002) work on dual practices in Balinese society, where communities consciously differentiate between "for us" and "for them" performances. Such strategies of boundary-making show that authenticity is not simply imposed by the state or the market but is also actively shaped by local actors. At the same time, tensions between younger and older generations suggest that negotiations of authenticity are internally contested, reflecting different priorities for cultural sustainability.

Fourth, the findings highlight the importance of the tourist gaze in shaping cultural representation. As Urry and Larsen (2011) note, tourists arrive with expectations of exotic authenticity, and these expectations influence how culture is staged. Participants acknowledged that tourists often misunderstood or oversimplified cultural practices, leading to anxieties about spiritual dilution. Yet, they also emphasized that tourism provided an opportunity to educate outsiders and reaffirm community pride. This dual perception illustrates that the tourist gaze is not merely an external imposition but a relational dynamic through which authenticity is co-produced.

Finally, the study contributes to debates on cultural sustainability in heritage tourism. As UNESCO (2016) emphasizes, sustainability requires that cultural practices remain meaningful for local communities, not just preserved as performances for outsiders. The findings show that cultural sustainability in Bali is negotiated across generations: elders emphasize preservation and ritual integrity, while younger actors value adaptation and global

visibility. This intergenerational dialogue reflects a pragmatic balance between continuity and change, suggesting that the resilience of Balinese culture lies in its capacity for ongoing negotiation.

Taken together, these findings indicate that authenticity in Balinese heritage tourism should not be understood as either preserved or destroyed but as constantly reworked through the interplay of ritual practice, commodification, community agency, and global tourism. By foregrounding community narratives, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of authenticity, showing that it is neither a fragile essence to be safeguarded nor a fiction created solely for tourists, but a living process negotiated within and across communities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Balinese communities negotiate authenticity in the context of heritage tourism, focusing on the ways sacred practices, staged performances, and community agency interact within a global tourism economy. The findings demonstrate that authenticity is not a fixed attribute of culture but a fluid and contested process, continually redefined in relation to ritual practice, tourist expectations, and local priorities.

Participants' narratives revealed both pride and ambivalence toward tourism. On one hand, rituals and performances provide opportunities for economic survival, cultural recognition, and intergenerational learning. On the other, concerns persist about commodification, the dilution of spiritual meaning, and the risk of misinterpretation by outsiders. Communities respond by creating distinctions between sacred and staged practices, employing strategies of boundary-making that preserve ritual integrity while adapting cultural forms for tourist audiences. These practices highlight local agency and the capacity of communities to assert control over definitions of authenticity, even within structurally unequal tourism economies.

The study also underscores the importance of intergenerational perspectives in shaping cultural sustainability. While older participants emphasized preservation and ritual purity, younger actors often valued adaptation and global visibility, framing tourism as a pathway for cultural resilience. These differences suggest that sustainability emerges not from rigid preservation but from ongoing negotiation that integrates tradition with adaptation.

By foregrounding community voices, this research contributes to broader debates on authenticity, commodification, and cultural sustainability in tourism. The case of Bali illustrates that heritage tourism is neither simply a threat to cultural integrity nor a guarantee of preservation. Instead, it represents a complex field of negotiation where communities continuously redefine authenticity on their own terms. Recognizing and supporting these local negotiations is essential for ensuring that heritage tourism contributes to cultural sustainability, not just for visitors but for the communities whose identities and livelihoods are most deeply intertwined with these practices.

Funding

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

REFERENCES

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. Annals of Tourism Research, 15(3), 371–386. https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X

Cohen, E., & Cohen, S. A. (2012). Authentication: Hot and cool. Annals of Tourism Research, 39(3), 1295–1314. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2012.03.004

Cole, S. (2007). Beyond authenticity and commodification. Annals of Tourism Research, 34(4), 943–960. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2007.05.004

Greenwood, D. J. (1989). Culture by the pound: An anthropological perspective on tourism as cultural commoditization. In V. Smith (Ed.), Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism (2nd ed., pp. 171–185). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hitchcock, M. (2001). Tourism and total crisis in Indonesia: The case of Bali. Asia Pacific Business Review, 8(2), 101–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/713999113

Hitchcock, M. (2019). Balinese identity and cultural tourism. Indonesia and the Malay World, 47(138), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2019.1592315

Hitchcock, M., & Darma Putra, I. N. (2007). Tourism, development and terrorism in Bali. Ashgate.

MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. American Journal of Sociology, 79(3), 589–603. https://doi.org/10.1086/225585

Picard, M. (1996). Bali: Cultural tourism and touristic culture. Archipelago Press.

Reuter, T. (2002). The house of our ancestors: Precedence and dualism in highland Balinese society. KITLV Press.

UNESCO. (2016). Culture: Urban future. Global report on culture for sustainable urban development. UNESCO Publishing.

Urry, J., & Larsen, J. (2011). The tourist gaze 3.0 (3rd ed.). Sage.

Vickers, A. (2012). Bali: A paradise created (2nd ed.). Tuttle Publishing.